Panama May Be The Biggest Blast Of Y2K

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While many Americans are making party plans to celebrate Y2K on New Year's Eve, Panamanian officials are lobbying to get President Clinton or Vice President Gore to attend their unique Y2K revelry. That's the day when the U.S. flag over the Panama Canal will be lowered for the last time as we abandon ownership of one of the most valuable pieces of real estate in the world.

If Clinton and Gore are smart, they will stay as far away as possible from the Panama Canal because the festivities will be a photo- op reminder of the foolish legacy of the Jimmy Carter Administration. It was the Carter-Torrijos Panama Treaties of 1978 that put December 31, 1999 in the history books as the date when the Panamanians take over our Canal.

Maybe former President Jimmy Carter will attend. After all, he was principally responsible for persuading the U.S. Senate, by one vote, to give away this great strategic U.S.-built waterway.

Rumors have been floating that the Panamanians have also invited Fidel Castro to attend. It would be fitting that he join the merrymaking because it was Castro who thumbed his nose at the Monroe Doctrine when he allowed Soviet missiles to be stationed in Cuba in 1962.

The Monroe Doctrine enunciated the U.S. policy that it is "dangerous to our peace and safety" for any foreign power to extend its system to the Western Hemisphere. In 1962 we were worried about Communist Russia's nuclear missiles deployed to Cuba; in 1999 we face the possibility that Communist China may put its nuclear missiles in Panama for a possible blackmail threat about Taiwan.

This danger comes from the fact that Panama has granted a Chinese Communist "front" 50-year leases to occupy the U.S.-built ports of Cristobal on the Atlantic end of the canal and Balboa on the Pacific end.

Rather than addressing the real arguments, Clinton had his spokesman Joe Lockhart call these concerns

"silly stuff" and had an unnamed White House official assert that the Chinese corporation holding the leases "is a legitimate company." But, as the Cox Report showed, the Chinese have totally integrated military and industrial operations under policies established by the late Deng Xiaoping.

Immense pressures are working to close our eyes to the national security danger from the Panama-China leases. Clinton doesn't dare to upset the Chinese with whom he has suspect political and financial ties, and too many senior Republicans are committed to the fantasy that China is just a trading partner, not a potential enemy.

Contrary to what we are led to believe, the Panama Canal giveaway is not a "done deal." Here are some constructive steps we can take.

1) Renounce or renegotiate the Panama Canal Treaties in light of new evidence that the United States and Panama did not ratify the same text. The DeConcini Reservation, which was added to get the treaty through the Senate, gave us the unilateral right to intervene in Panama if we believe the Canal is threatened.

Carter hid from the American people the fact that Panama ratified the treaty without our reservation. Panama's version contains a three- paragraph counter-reservation, never submitted to the U.S. Senate, that requires Panama's "cooperation" before we try to defend the Canal.

Another reason to renounce the treaty is that Panama's Law No. 5 violated the Panama Canal treaties over and over again. The Panama Canal treaties can also be declared void because of "changing circumstances" as authorized by Art. 62 of the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties.

2) Demand that Panama nullify the lease agreements granted to the Chinese and initiate a new bidding process that is open and fair. No one should be bound by the current agreements because the process was corrupt and discriminatory against a U.S. company.

3) Exercise our rights under the 1978 Panama treaties to protect and defend the Canal beyond the year 2000. Halt any more transfers of U.S. military installations, including Howard Air Force Base, the most important U.S. base south of the Rio Grande; Rodman Naval Station, a deep-draft port capable of logistic support for any warship; and Fort Sherman, the only base in the world specializing in jungle warfare and survivor training.

Depending on Panama to defend the Canal against China's aggressive acts, or against the Colombian drug cartel, is a bad joke. Panama has no army, navy or air force, and the country's police are completely unable to defend the canal against sabotage or terrorism by narcotics- funded forces already coming in from Colombia.

Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Admiral Thomas Moorer told the U.S. Senate that "we are on what I consider to be a collision course with disaster in the very near future. . . . I truly can't remember a time when I have been more concerned about the security of the country."

Panama has a new government and frequent polls show that a majority of Panamanians support a continued U.S. military presence. Time is running out to do something to stop Communist China from establishing its threatening beachhead in the Western Hemisphere.